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ABSTRACT

A study of teacher perceptions regarding a proposal to adopt block scheduling was done at a small-city high school located in a predominantly rural county. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 selected teachers from the faculty of 41. Lack of communication was found to be the central theme in the resistance that emerged. This paper explores the errors that were made by those initiating the proposal, the reactions of those involved, and what can be done to salvage the effort. The best outcome of the effort was to reveal sufficient resistance that the block scheduling proposal will be studied for at least another year. This will give the school district time to improve communication and allow the administration to make a commitment to support the teaching staff's decision about its needs under a new schedule. Teachers must be shown that the change is really worth the effort. (Author/SLD)

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Teacher Perceptions Regarding Block Scheduling:

Reactions to Change

Abstract

A study of teacher perceptions regarding a proposal to adopt block scheduling was done at a small city high school located in a predominantly rural county. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected teachers. Lack of communication was found to be the central theme in the resistance that emerged. This paper explores the errors that were made by those initiating the proposal, the reactions of those involved, and what can be done to salvage the effort.

Presented at the
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Part I

Background

Block scheduling has been around for quite a few years and is one attempt to address the problem of not having enough time in the school day to allow in-depth coverage of many topics. There are various versions of block scheduling around but any school adopting such a plan has to accept the fact that teaching on a block schedule requires a major re-thinking of what goes on in the classroom and requires individual teachers to change, often radically, their classroom practices. Such a major change is not undertaken lightly by most teachers.

When a school begins to discuss the issue of block scheduling, and the inevitable change that accompanies it, few teachers will take a neutral stance. Advocates cite the increased contact time per class that allows more in-depth coverage of class material, fewer periods to plan for each day, less stress on students due to fewer classes per day, and more time to aid struggling students within the regular classroom. Opponents worry about adequate preparation time each day, availability of support materials for longer class sessions, the short attention span of many students, the lack of daily contact with their students, and even the effect on academic performance of an every-other-day class schedule. But at the core of all these concerns is the uncertainty that comes with change.

Purpose

In an in-service meeting the staff at my high school heard a faculty member from another high school similar in size, student body make-up, and surrounding community discuss the concept of block scheduling as it was being implemented at that school. Sitting in the audience, I sensed that concerns being expressed, through the questions being asked, centered more on the issue of change rather than the immediate question of block scheduling.

They were asking things like "What can we do in _____ when we don't have enough audio-visual materials now? Will we still have study halls and who will cover them? Will we get the same amount of planning time? What schedule plan will we follow, an 8-block with four periods per day and all classes held the same number of days in a two-week period? Or will we do a 4-block plan with only four classes a day that meets every day, but just for a semester? Will we have to teach more classes than we do now? Has this already been decided or are we actually going to be able to say 'No' if we decide we don't want it? Who's behind this idea for our school?" The purpose of this case study was to discover, describe, and better understand teacher perceptions regarding the issue of block scheduling.

Focus

Some teachers seem very open to change, while others "dig in their heels" and change reluctantly, often adding their own "touch" that effectively negates the change. I am especially interested in teacher resistance to change.

Educational reform literature has convinced me that no real reform at any level of education can be successful unless the classroom teachers involved are solidly behind the effort (Gaul, 1994; Hiller, 1995; Page, 1995; Pratt, 1995; Sarason, 1990; Shanker, 1995; Sheurich & Fuller, 1995). While other factors also play a part, teacher support is, in my opinion, a key component in any successful reform movement. I wanted to study, in particular, teachers who were leading the resistance to block scheduling and teachers who were leading the effort to initiate it.

Question

I wanted to better understand teacher perceptions and attitudes regarding the changes related to moving to block scheduling. I felt that if these attitudes could be identified and

their concerns addressed, we might be able to accomplish some meaningful change at our school, if not through block scheduling, then through the debate over the issue of change itself.

Four questions helped direct this study. Where did the impetus for this proposed change originate? What is the reason behind wanting to make this change? Is it really going to be decided by teachers whether or not to proceed further or is the "handwriting on the wall" already? Is it really to help our students or is it just a way of forcing mediocre teachers to get better, or get out?

Grounding

I used the case study approach. As an insider, I had access to the entire teaching staff and was able to have formal and informal conversations with the participants about the study with relative ease. This study was a bounded one in the sense that the issue being studied concerned just one building in our school system and the research participants were all classroom teachers in that building and were all involved in the discussion stage regarding implementation of block scheduling. I wanted to describe participant perceptions about this issue and to discover just what they thought about the issue of block scheduling. I wanted to find out if they were afraid of change, in general, or just this particular change.

Part II: Methodology

Research Setting

The site used in this study was a high school is a small city school system in a predominantly rural county. It had an enrollment of around 700 students in grades 9-12. There were 41 classroom teachers on staff, not including the principal, assistant principal, two counselors, and a part-time athletic director. Of the 41 teachers, three were music

education personnel only in the building part of the day (one for one period in the morning, two for part of the afternoon), and two other teachers who commuted daily from the middle school to teach either math or science classes in the afternoon.

The community was "blue collar" for the most part with some middle and upper-middle-class families. It was predominantly Caucasian with few Afro-Americans, Hispanics, or Asians. The school system enjoyed good support from the community, both in terms of programs offered and financial support through tax levies. The building, completed in 1927, was in good shape but with the increased enrollment of the past few years was cramped for classroom space in some areas, notably science, health/physical education, computer technology, and vocational agriculture.

At the time of the study I had been a member of this faculty for eight years and usually took a very active part in discussions on curriculum issues and innovations in teaching techniques. I was hesitant to voice my feelings during the data collection stage of the study, not wanting to have my opinions affect how the participants responded to me.

Informants

I selected four individuals who I had personally observed to have strong opinions regarding the issue of block scheduling. Persons expressing very favorable viewpoints and persons voicing very negative viewpoints were included in this first group, as well as several who I perceived to have a more moderate stance on the issue of block scheduling.

Participants were given a letter briefly describing the project and asked to sign an informed consent form if they were willing to take part. (The Cover Letter and Consent Form make up Appendices A and B.) After the initial four people had been spoken with, I

sampled to saturation, which involved three more teachers, who also signed informed consent forms, for a total of seven.

Gatekeeper

The gatekeeper for the study was the building principal. All university protocols for participant privacy and freedom to participate or not were stringently followed. Confidentiality with regards to participants' responses was a concern for some teachers because of past problems with administrators in the district that had left some teachers unwilling to voice their opinions for fear of administrative reprisals.

Data Gathering

For this study, I used semi-structured interviews working loosely from a scripted set of questions and taking notes as we talked. (The initial set of questions are in Appendix C.) I met with each of the participants, individually, in a session that usually lasted around an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes. Most were held in my room after school with the door closed for privacy. One was held in the morning before school began and another was held in the participant's classroom immediately after school.

My grand tour question was "How do you feel about the possible move to block scheduling?" I expected this question to open the "floodgates" and it did. I found myself frequently having to skip one or two of the other questions and making notes under those questions using responses from this one question alone. The other questions were designed to explore participant perceptions about their "world view," their general reaction to the idea of changing how they teach, and questions I hoped would give me their perspectives on why this issue is even being raised at this time. I used a couple of demographic questions to see if there was any indication of a relationship between in "time in service" and resistance to block

scheduling. I also allowed for comments from teachers who had either taught under a block scheduling system at another school or who had gone on a visitation to a school as part of our building's study of the issue. I allowed voices from each side of the issue to be heard so I could get a better perspective on the whole issue and not just one side of it.

Emphasis changed during the course of the study from the first to the last interview as various themes began to emerge. Less attention was devoted to the reasons given for opposition or support of block scheduling and I focused more on trying to understand the underlying reasons for the resistance or support. Questions about how block scheduling would affect their teaching what they thought about this began to be more revealing.

Data Analysis

Using Bogdin and Biklin's (1992) list of thinking units as a guide (list cited in Hofmann, 1996, p. 4), I began with the thinking units **definition of the situation**, **perspectives held by the informants**, and **strategy**. The first unit would help me as I tried to understand each participant's "world view" or how the change to block scheduling would affect their roles as teachers. The second would help me get their perspective on the issue. The third thinking unit, **strategy**, also helped me look at how participants tried to make sense of the reason for the proposed move to block scheduling. Interview text was examined using the conceptual text segment (CTS) approach (Hofmann, 1996) to organize information according to thinking units identified prior to the beginning of the study. Analysis was then done to identify the major themes that emerged from the data.

From the second interview to the last interview I used a constant comparative approach to examine the most recent and all preceding interviews to see if patterns were emerging in the data. This examination helped guide my questioning in subsequent interviews

as the original scripted questions were added to and otherwise revised. Saturation was actually reached after the fourth person interviewed but the final interviews did elaborate on some of the points made by earlier interviews, helping to establish trustworthiness. A brief summary was prepared and shown to several more teachers as an additional member check to see if I was accurately reporting teacher perceptions on block scheduling. All who were shown the summary thought I had "got it right."

Emergent Themes

Some themes that emerged were 1) differing perceptions as to the reason for the proposed change and even if it was really necessary at all; 2) differing degrees of willingness to accommodate the proposed change; 3) concern that this "innovation" would not be supported by the school system and teachers would be "left holding the bag;" and 4) concern that the "negatives" regarding block scheduling were not being seriously addressed.

Part III: Analysis Meaning

Perceptions of the Participants

From participant responses emerged four general themes discussed in the following paragraphs. **Boldface** type represents, if not direct, word-for-word quotes from my interviews, very close approximations to such.

Participants had differing perceptions as to the reason for the proposed change and even if it was really necessary at all. Those in favor cited a better educational program for our students and a need for change in how teachers in the building taught.

"It will allow for more time and a higher quality of education."

"It will force changes in teachers' teaching techniques. If you're still following lessons and methods from when you started teaching, you're stagnant and need to change."

Those opposed generally claimed that what was being done was working and they saw no need to change.

"I don't know that we're doing things so badly now. Haven't our kids succeeded?"

Participants also expressed vastly differing degrees of willingness to accommodate the proposed change. Some were adamantly opposed.

"The negatives outweigh the positives. I'm pretty much totally opposed. I was undecided until I made a school visit and after what I heard and saw there I'm against it."

Some were enthusiastic and expressed eagerness to try out block scheduling.

"I'm excited - I won't lie or candy coat it! I'm ready to try something different."

Other participants also felt they didn't have enough information but were at least willing to consider it further.

"I feel very nervous about it. I don't have enough information to make a decision. As a department we're open and if we hear it's working well where it's being implemented we'll feel better. We're willing to look at the whole situation."

Even teachers who were learning towards support of block scheduling agreed with those expressing negative views when it came to their concern that there will not be the

strong support by the school system necessary to make the plan work. All participants I spoke with brought up the same issues.

"More teaching materials ... will cost money ... extra staff needed ... not seeing much evidence of support from the administration ... there's not much communication from that end on this ... need 'real in-service' to teach us how to change our teaching styles ... might require more in the way of facilities and I doubt if that's going to happen."

There was also a general concern that negative aspects of block scheduling are not being seriously addressed. All of the following were mentioned as areas that need serious attention before a decision to go to block scheduling can be made.

"Attendance policy ... students moving in/out of district in mid-year ... fear there will actually be less planning time when block scheduling will require even more planning ... teachers having to teach extra classes ... concerns about "at risk" students and special education students ... concerns about discipline ... teacher resistance to change ... financial implications."

Participants were not in the least shy about expressing their opinions. The surprising thing about these comments is that not only did they come from those opposed to the proposal, but also came from those who had expressed interest in it. This faculty showed itself to be thinking through this proposal much more than some of them might be willing to admit. This has major implications in the solutions to their problems.

Researcher's Interpretations

Further analysis of these themes saw them coalescing into three key themes. One was that in spite of all the "talk" about block scheduling there was a **lack of communication**,

teachers on both sides of the issue felt that what they were saying was not being listened to by the people pushing the block scheduling proposal. Another was a **lack of trust**, teachers on both sides of the issue were suspicious of the reasons for the move to block scheduling and whether or not adequate support will be given to allow it to succeed. The third major theme that emerged was a **sense of complacency**, a feeling that "what we do now isn't bad, so why change?" Of these, a **lack of communication** was the most important since it led to the others.

Teachers in this building distrusted the administration. Many perceived the entire issue of block scheduling to be originated by the administration. There was considerable resistance because of this. In fact, the original idea came from guidance counselors who heard about block scheduling at various regional meetings they had attended. They had discussed its benefits with the building administrator. Before they had a chance to bring it to the faculty, he brought it up in a faculty meeting as "something we ought to look into." That was enough for some staff to have an immediate negative response.

Even those faculty who knew the true origin of the idea didn't trust the administration because of problems experienced in past years with other reform efforts. Considerable time, for instance, was put into developing a district-wide and building level "technology plan," which has since been put on hold due to "lack of funds." This faculty came to believe that "if it costs money, forget it." They didn't feel the support will be there for materials, staffing, and the training necessary to do the job properly.

Teachers also realized that going to block scheduling will require some major policy changes, especially in the attendance area. Through my own experience as a teacher in this district over the previous eight years, and as a result of many formal and informal discussions

with my fellow faculty members, I was aware of the commonly-held perception that the school's attendance policy is weak because of a lack of administrative willingness to enforce it. They also felt that missing longer classes in a block scheduling set-up will make improved attendance a must. Lack of support for teachers in other areas, such as disputes with parents over student classroom misbehavior or violations of athletic discipline policies, has caused teachers to not expect the administration to be a strong advocate for educational issues in the face of parental resistance. Block scheduling was seen to be an area where the administration "would not back us up."

This faculty has quite a few veteran teachers (15-20 years experience) with many of them in this school system for most of that time. The school has enjoyed a good reputation for preparing its students for further education and the workplace. There was a sense of complacency evidenced by many of the staff at various meetings where block scheduling was being discussed. Teachers felt satisfied with what they were doing and many saw no need to change what was working. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" was overheard on more than a few occasions, both in faculty meetings, interviews, and in casual conversations in the hall or faculty work room.

There were also faculty members who fit the description of "veteran" teachers and who embraced the possibilities for improvement provided by this change. They differed from their more resistant counterparts in that many of them had a history of continuing their professional growth either through formal college course-work or frequent workshop attendance to upgrade their teaching skills and subject area knowledge. Teachers in this group were more willing to view the change to block scheduling as a "positive" which would benefit their students and themselves, even if it required them to make changes in their

teaching styles. They were also more likely to report that they had already changed their teaching styles several times in their careers and were already using some of the techniques a block scheduling approach would require of them (e.g. teaching to different learning styles, varying modes of presentation within the class period, using more "hands on" activities).

The fact remains that this faculty did not have a large number of professionally-motivated teachers who actively sought out further education in their academic subject areas. Most who pursued out-of-school in-service did so in connection with a coaching or other extracurricular assignments, not from a concern for updating their classroom, subject area, teaching skills.

Communication problems existed at all levels. It contributed to both an increasing mistrust of the block scheduling proposal and to the complacency some staff already felt about the issue.

The guidance counselors didn't bring the idea to the faculty first. Then, when the backlash to the idea occurred because of its coming from the administrator, the counselors didn't immediately step forward and identify the source of the proposal. Even though a member of the faculty, I was just as unaware of its source until I began interviewing. A key informant gave me this information and it was corroborated by subsequent interviews and questioning the counselors personally. Their later admission that it was their original idea was not believed by some on the staff.

Faculty reaction to the administrator's involvement led to his voluntary exclusion from meetings called by the faculty member who led the study of block scheduling. It was felt the principal's presence at the meetings would further the impression that the proposal was administratively-driven. This was not communicated to people who attended the

meetings. This resulted in people who didn't attend the meetings continuing to believe the proposal was administration-pushed, while whose who had attended the sessions came to believe the administration wasn't supporting their efforts to investigate the issue.

In an effort to better expose staff to block scheduling, professional leave was granted to those who wished to make site visits. Some staff never got the information about signing up to go on such visits and they felt left out.

This lack of communication led to further complacency, albeit by two different roots. Some didn't think the plan would ever come to fruition through lack of support by the administration. Others were convinced that the decision had already been made and whatever was done by the faculty wasn't going to make a difference anyway. Still others were complacent through a sense that it was unnecessary because of the good job already being done using our "tried and true" methods.

Part IV: Summary

Practical Meaning

Any major change in how teachers teach causes them great anxiety. When you start manipulating factors that affect the classroom dynamics they are accustomed to, you will meet with resistance. (See, especially, Sarason, 1990.) This doesn't mean that teachers are unwilling to change. It does mean that change has to be introduced carefully. This study shows what happens when it is not done with considerable planning, involving faculty members, before it ever comes before the faculty as a whole.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Communication is a key component when planning any major educational change. People must not just be given a chance to voice their concerns, they have to be listened to,

and their concerns have to be addressed. They have to be convinced that the proposed change is worth the effort they're being asked to make. They have to have a chance to explore all the side issues that affect their daily lives so intimately. They have to feel as though they're in control of these discussions and feel ownership of the final plan produced. Communication between the school and its students and the community at large will be important in the final version of the plan which gets implemented. A constant process of communication and revision will be necessary during the implementation of the plan.

There has to be increased trust between all the parties involved. Teachers have to trust administrators to support their efforts and be advocates for their reforms outside the immediate building sphere. The administration has to trust its teachers enough to allow them room to experiment with something new and be willing to support that effort financially if that's what it takes. The community has to be willing to trust its teachers and administrators and recognize that their efforts are in the best interests of the students.

Complacency is a problem in every profession. When what you do works, it's hard to convince some people that they can still do better. In-services that do not inspire teachers with new ideas or otherwise meet their professional growth needs do more harm than good. They promote the idea that you don't have to learn anything new to still be able to teach and prepare students adequately for college or the workplace.

Is there a message of hope to be found here? The answer is a qualified "Yes." There are a lot of "ifs" that will decide the fate of block scheduling at this school. The best thing the school has going for it now is that sufficient resistance has arisen that there will be at least one more year of study before block scheduling is implemented, if at all. This will give the district time to correct some of the mistakes that have been made.

First, there has to be more meaningful communication. All the nagging little questions people have asked have to be addressed. Some of these can be handled by getting people release time to visit schools with block scheduling on the 8-block plan (the one most of our teachers seem to favor if they favor block scheduling at all). Teachers have to retain control of the dialogue during this initial phase. It may be decided that other things do, indeed, have to come first before the question of block scheduling is decided. Perhaps a concerted effort to change teaching styles within the current course schedule may be an alternative. Perhaps a flexible-modular scheduling approach might give more traditional teachers a chance to observe for a year how the longer modules work before they have to go to them in their own rooms.

Second, teachers need the administration to make a commitment to support the teaching staff's decision, whatever it is. If the study shows a need for more staff, the district must make the commitment, and not back out on it, to hire new staff. If more teaching materials are needed, the district must be willing to allocate or find funds for them. Continued support through release time and worthwhile in-service training will go a long way towards restoring some trust in the administration's sincerity.

Third, to combat the complacency seen in the district, teachers have to be shown that this change is really worth the effort. They have to be shown how it will help students learn better. They have to be given help to adapt their teaching styles to longer periods on an every-other-day basis (if that's ultimately the form of block scheduling that gets adopted). The fact that teachers in this district, even the ones who are opposed, are carefully examining the issue for negatives (and positives) demonstrates they're capable of planning a reform that

they can live with. They just have to be allowed to do it at their own pace and get comfortable with the idea first.

In conclusion, if the district allows teachers to drive the reform to wherever it might lead and gives them the support they need, there might be a chance for it to work. But even with district support, the key is to let teachers convince themselves that this change is beneficial, even if it might require them to make major changes in how they work in the classroom. Teachers in this district are not totally opposed to change. Their resistance to this proposal has more to do with a lack of communication than from a rejection of any and all change.

The lesson to be learned here by other districts initiating reforms is clear. These conclusions would apply to any major reform effort schools might consider. If reforms are going to work, you have to communicate (i.e. a two-way dialogue) with all the parties involved, not just "talk" or "give people a chance to be heard" (and then do what you want to anyway). Then you will at least have a chance for success.

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Appendix A: Cover Letter

October 25, 1996

Dear _____,

I would like to enlist your cooperation as part of a research study I'm completing for one of my classes at Miami University this fall. Our deliberations over block scheduling is the topic for my research study for my Qualitative Research Methods class.

I wish to talk with you about your feelings and concerns on the proposed move to the block scheduling concept. I want to find out what you perceive to be the positive and negative consequences of such a change.

You will have the choice to participate or not, and even to withdraw from the study at any time if you so choose. Our conversation will probably take 30-45 minutes (or less) and will be arranged before or after school, during lunch, or even at an off-site location if more convenient for you. Follow-up conversations, if necessary, will take place for the purpose of clarification or elaboration.

Individual teachers, or their subject areas, will not be identified in any summary of results. Direct quotes will neither be attributed to their source nor will gender-specific pronouns be used. Mr. ----------, as Chair of the Block Scheduling Study Committee, and Mr. ----------, as Principal, along with all those participating faculty at the high school, will be given a summary of the results of the study. Results of this study may also be used as part of a professional paper or presentation at an education conference.

I have hopes that this study will give us insights into the issues we face and help us make a more-informed decision regarding the block scheduling proposal. I would like very much for you to take part.

Respectfully,

Ed Corley

Appendix B: Consent Form

Consent Form

Name (Printed): _____

1. A written outline of the study has been given me and its purpose explained.
2. I have also been apprised of my right to not participate, or to drop out of the study at any time I wish without any repercussions.
3. I have also received assurances that I will not be identified by name, or in any other way, in any written results arising from this study. Notes taken during my conversation with Mr. Corley will be kept in confidence.

_____ I choose to participate in this study.

_____ I choose NOT to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Date Signature

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Appendix C

Original Scripted Interview Questions

1. How do you feel about the possible move to block scheduling?

2. How would block scheduling affect how you teach? What do you think you'd have to do differently? How do you feel about that?

3. What do you think are some of the things we should consider as we study block scheduling?

4. Have you had any prior experience with block scheduling that gives you any insight into the process? If so, tell me about your previous experience with it

5. How do you feel about the process being used to make the decision on block scheduling?

6. We have been told that block scheduling will require re-thinking our entire approach to teaching and that it's only one step on the road to change. What is your reaction to this statement? How do you feel about it?

7. How do other teachers in your department feel about block scheduling? Have you gotten together as a group to discuss it, either formally or informally?

8. Is there anything else you think we should discuss about block scheduling that hasn't come up?

9. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

10. How many years in the [redacted] system?

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